



Washington State Auditor's Office

Performance Audit

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Improving Staff Safety in Washington's Prisons

Following the murder of a correctional officer in 2011, the Department of Corrections implemented a series of initiatives designed to improve staff safety. Our audit focused on whether these initiatives are working.

To conduct this audit, we hired experts in the field of corrections from the Criminal Justice Institute to evaluate how well the Department had designed and implemented the initiatives. Based on this work, our experts believe complete and consistent implementation of the staff safety initiatives will continue to increase the safety and security of prison staff. However, not all the initiatives have been fully or consistently implemented at all facilities, and there are gaps between the Department's policies, procedures, and practices and correctional leading practices. In addition, we found that while the majority of staff feel safe, less than half feel safer now than when the initiatives were implemented, and less than a quarter think they will feel safer three years from now.

One factor that limited our analysis was that the Department lacks specific performance goals and measures for most of its staff safety initiatives. Specific goals for each initiative and measures to evaluate them would give Department executives and managers the indicators they need to better understand if the initiatives have been effective.

Washington's staff safety initiatives are innovative and unique

According to our experts, no other state has developed such an advanced and comprehensive set of initiatives focused on improving staff safety. They believe the safety initiatives (listed below) are all based on good correctional practices, have likely improved the safety of prison staff, and – if fully and consistently implemented – will continue to reduce the risk of harm to staff.

Staff safety initiatives devised and implemented by Washington's Department of Corrections

Initiative category	Initiative description
Staff accountability	Developed policies, procedures and practices designed to ensure facilities can account for all staff in an emergency
Safety equipment and facility improvements	Added equipment: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• For personal protection, such as pepper spray• To signal the need for assistance, such as duress alarms and body alarms• To improve visibility, such as additional cameras and mirrors
Offender job placement and classification	Created multidisciplinary teams to decide offender job placement and classification
Staffing changes	Added staff at each facility, including a security specialist to coordinate and provide support for staff safety initiatives, including managing the staff suggestion process
Security training	Added specific security training to the annual training program for all staff, held security forums with all first-line supervisors to discuss safety and implemented monthly "place safety" musters for all staff to discuss security issues
Statewide and local security advisory committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Created a statewide committee with representation across facilities and staff levels to advise the Department on safety issues and staff concerns• Created local committees at each facility to review staff safety suggestions and make recommendations to their facility or the statewide committee

Staff feedback on what is and is not working well is consistent across facilities

We surveyed all prison staff, asking them to list those actions they feel are most effective in improving safety. Responses included improved accountability procedures, the deployment of pepper spray, and more radios or added radio features, such as remote microphones and duress alarms. However, the third most common response written in by staff was “nothing.”

We also asked staff to suggest improvements they believe would make them feel safer. Three often-cited actions were hiring more staff, installing more cameras and mirrors, and for management to respond more actively to their safety concerns. In focus groups, staff also stressed the importance of feeling listened to. Some said they wanted more dialogue with management, while others wanted more opportunities to communicate with each other.

Opportunities to improve implementation of staff safety initiatives

We found that although each facility had implemented the initiatives to some degree, not all initiatives have been fully or consistently implemented. In evaluating the Department’s policies and procedures specific to the staff safety initiatives and observing them in practice at each facility, our experts found that the many areas could be improved by clarifying guidance and expectations, including staff accountability procedures, use of emergency equipment, number and placement of cameras and the safety suggestion process.

Gaps exist between correctional leading practices and those used by the Department

To find other opportunities to improve staff safety, our experts identified correctional leading practices most relevant to reducing the risk of harm to staff. They then compared this list to the Department’s and each facility’s safety related policies, procedures and practices.

While our experts found the Department’s policies and procedures encompass most areas considered important correctional practices, some areas are not fully addressed by Department or facility policies and procedures, or are not being adequately carried out.

Gaps in Department policies and procedures

Staff search policy is absent, and practices are inconsistent

Cell searches are too infrequent and inconsistent across facilities

Staffing model has not been updated to account for the additional demands placed on staff

Visibility is poor in some areas

Search policies for people entering facilities are lacking

Control center access policy is inadequate

Policies on whether non-custody staff need to carry radios are lacking, and practices are inconsistent

Policies surrounding offender movement need improvement

Monitoring and auditing activities could be more focused

Recommendations in brief

We recommend the Department of Corrections:



Address issues with the implementation of the staff safety initiatives.



Address gaps identified between the Department’s safety related policies, procedures and practices, and correctional leading practices.



Enhance the Department’s approach to assessing the effectiveness of the staff safety initiatives with specific performance goals and metrics and feedback from staff.



Improve communication with staff on safety issues.
